

A History of the Brooks Free Library

Established in 1880, Brooks Free Library was the first free public library in Harwich. Founded by Col. Henry C. Brooks and originally known as the Broadbrooks Free Library, the Library is part of a broader legacy left to the town by the Brooks family. The Library has been owned and operated by the Town of Harwich since 1910 and is governed by a 7-member elected Board of Trustees.



Col. Henry C. Brooks

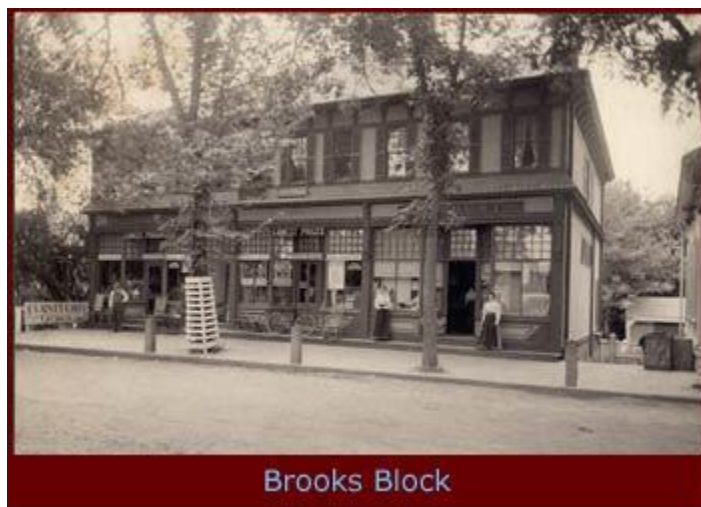
The first member of the Brooks family to make his home in Harwich was Henry's great-grandfather, Beriah Broadbrooks, who was born in 1676 and arrived in Harwich in 1694, the same year it was incorporated. He had fifteen children by two different wives. By an act of the Massachusetts legislature, passed March 14, 1806, Beriah's great-grandson, Obed Broadbrooks had the family name changed to Brooks. Obed had nine children, including Henry, but only a few grandchildren. Henry and his sisters, Tamesin, Harriet, and Sarah never married. Brother Sidney married had no children. Obed owned the first store in Harwich and his sons became businessmen, traders, and educators.

Henry Cobb Brooks was born May 16, 1824 and was Obed's youngest son. At the age of 14, he left Harwich for Boston, where he worked as a clerk. Eventually he became a partner in a firm supplying ships in Boston Harbor, and later built ships and operated a sailing line to Australia. He was a prominent member of the

Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company and acquired the title of Major by meritorious conduct in the Militia and that of Colonel by virtue of his appointment on the staff of Maj. Gen. Samuel Andrews.

While Henry pursued his business in Boston, his brothers and sisters were busy in Harwich. Obed, Jr. was a shopkeeper & merchant, commissioner of the Mashpee Indians and was a founding officer of the Cape Cod Five Cents Savings Bank and the Cape Cod National Bank. Formed in 1855, the bank was originally housed in the Greek Revival building that today is part of the Brooks Free Library. Sidney founded and built the Pine Grove Seminary, today's Brooks Academy Museum. The school offered young people an opportunity to extend their education beyond the elementary level, and offered courses in navigation, mathematics, music, art, languages and other subjects. More than 1000 young men and women, "scholars", passed through the doors of his school in its 20 year history. Sarah built and left a parsonage to the First Parish Church, known today as First Congregational Church. In addition to serving as the first librarian for the Brooks Free Library, sister Tamesin, who was legendary for her business skills and temperance activities, willed Brooks Park to the Town of Harwich.

In the 1880 Henry built a multi-use structure in Harwich Center, the Brooks Block, to house several stores, a free public library and have other uses. Over the years various shops occupied the first floor, including C.S. Hunt, Dry Goods and Furniture; Frank Snow, Parlor Stoves; and Small and Snow, Curtains and Wallpapers. Several upstairs rooms and a small apartment were also rented. The rooms were often let to lawyers for offices or to dressmakers, milliners, and even a barber. Rental monies from these enterprises were meant to support the library, which was located on the east side of the second floor.



With construction of the Brooks Block complete, a reception and open house was held at the library on Thanksgiving Day, 1880. The reference collection was spread out on a large oak table, and the shelves held a collection of 2,500 volumes of fiction, poetry, history and biography, donated by Henry Brooks, as well as a selection of juvenile literature and files of Boston newspapers. Plaster busts of Shakespeare, Milton, Byron, Burns, Dickens, and Washington Irving, which can be seen today in the 2nd floor Reference area, were on display.

On January 1, 1881, the library officially opened with Miss Tamesin Brooks, age 60, serving as the first librarian. The Brooks family was very much involved in the operation of the library. Henry Brooks built the building and conceived of the plan to support the library. His brother Sidney and their two sisters, Tamesin and Sarah, arranged, numbered and cataloged the collection.

In June of 1881, Pliny Nickerson of Harwich donated 40 Rogers Groups Statues to the Library. A room adjacent to the library room was opened to house the new collection. The Rogers Groups were plaster statues, very popular at the time, which stood two to three feet tall and depicted themes of contemporary America, the Civil War and everyday life.



Rogers Groups

The Brooks family ran the library through its early years. Tamesin Brooks served as librarian without pay until her death in 1891. When other members of the Brooks family, Sarah, and Henry Brooks Davis, found the maintenance and managing of the library to be too difficult, an association of interested townspeople was formed and the family conveyed the property to the Brooks Library Association in 1896. The following year the name was changed to the Broadbrooks Free Library Association but in 1908 it was changed back to Brooks Free Library Association.

The February 1910 Town Meeting accepted the gift of the Brooks Free Library, "the real estate known as the Brooks Block and the books, statuary and personal property therein." Brooks Free Library became a municipal library, with the transfer of property taking place in April 1910. The library was open Saturday afternoons from 1:30 to 5:30, and these hours remained the same until 1947.

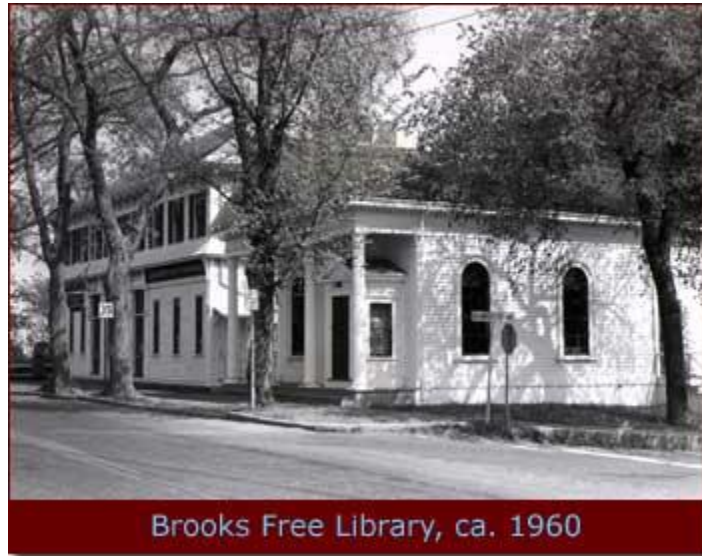
In 1933, Brooks Free Library received needed repairs under the Works Progress Administration (WPA) program that was directed by the State's Division of Public Libraries. The only expense to the town were supplies and the housing of the workers.

The Second District court of Barnstable was moved to the first floor of the Brooks Block in 1936 and the building was again renovated under the auspices of the WPA. Rooms included the main courtroom, the juvenile court, and small rooms for lawyers and probation officers. A modern heating was installed throughout the building except for an unused room on the upper floor. Several partitions were removed upstairs to create a large young people's room and the Rogers Groups were moved across the hall to the south room, which was painted a pale blue.

The library received a permanent loan from the U.S. Government of 10 pencil sketches done by Lawrence Robbins under the WPA. The sketches were of various Harwich scenes and vistas, some of which no longer exist, and included the Moody Farm, Bell's Neck, the Herring River, and Pleasant Bay.

In 1947 Virginia (Ginny) Doane was hired as librarian and served in this position for forty-two years until her retirement in 1989. Library hours were expanded at this time to include Tuesday and Thursday evenings, 7-9 pm, in addition to the Saturday afternoon hours.

The library continued to grow and by the late 1960's it was using the entire second floor and the third floor attic. In 1967 the town purchased the Greek Revival building next door on the corner of Bank and Main Streets, which had begun its life in 1855 as home to Cape Cod Five Cents Savings Bank and the Cape Cod National Bank. In 1914 the bank moved across Main St. to a building constructed for that purpose, which now serves as Harwich Town Hall. The building then became home to the Telephone Exchange.



Brooks Free Library, ca. 1960

In 1970 the Second District Court moved to Orleans and Town lost its tenant on the lower floor of the Brooks Block. The Library had grown and needed additional space and dedicated parking. In 1971 town meeting voted to purchase the Bank St. lot behind the Brooks Block for a parking lot for the library and in 1972 Town Meeting voted to renovate the Brooks Block and Telephone Exchange buildings for library use. The old telephone building was turned into a reading room with special glass cases installed to display the Rogers Groups. The library's collection had expanded from the original 40 pieces given by Pliny Nickerson to 69. Since the sculptor, John Rogers, had only had 80 of his pieces ever mass-produced and cast in plaster, the collection at the library was thought to be the largest outside of New York City.

In early March of 1976 the Boston Globe carried a large feature story on the new interest among art collectors in Rogers Groups statuary. A few weeks later, on April 1st, while the Finance Committee met across the street at Town Hall and a small crowd of voters gathered at the High School on Oak Street for a special town meeting, the Brooks Library was burglarized and 56 Rogers Groups statues were stolen. The Brooks Block did not have a security system and thieves broke

in the back door, ripped the drapes from the windows and used them to wrap the fragile plaster statues. They carried the statues out the back door and across the vacant lot to a waiting van. Despite a FBI investigation that continued for years, none of the stolen Rogers Groups statues have ever been recovered.

Automation came to the Brooks Free Library when it joined the newly formed Cape Libraries Automated Materials Sharing (CLAMS) consortium in 1989. Inputting of cataloging records took place over the next few years and live circulation on the automated system began in 1991.

Like the town, the Library continued to grow, and after many years of planning, a renovation and expansion project was presented to residents. On May 7, 1996 the Harwich Town Meeting voted unanimous support of the library renovation project. The following month, on June 17, 1996, 65% of Harwich voters agreed to a debt exclusion ballot vote which asked for \$3.1 million dollars to fund the project. Later a \$1.3 million dollar federal Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) construction grant was received from the Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners. This LSTA grant reduced the cost of the library renovation and expansion project for Harwich taxpayers to \$1.8 million. The Friends of Brooks Free Library contributed additional funds to purchase the adjacent lot on Bank St. for additional parking, to finish the basement to create a meeting room, and to provide furnishings for the renovated facility.



Renovated and expanded Library - south side, parking lot entrance

In October 1996 Brooks Free Library moved to temporary quarters at the Star Market Plaza in Harwich Port, thanks to a generous \$1 dollar per year lease from Tedeschi Realty. The project was complete in early 1998 and the Library reopened in the renovated and expanded facility in February 1998. The project won a Historic Preservation Award from the Massachusetts Historical Commission for successfully maintaining the historic character of the building.



Current view - Brooks Free Library – along Main. St. side from west